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ABSTRACT

Noting that families are increasingly spending time apart from one another due to work or other commitments and the ease of travel, this booklet discusses how parents can learn to cope with being away from their children and how they can feel comfortable integrating back into family life. The booklet also includes useful tips on how to help children understand and adapt to changing family environments. Written primarily for parents who have to spend time away from home, their partners, and families, the booklet may also be relevant to parents who are separated from their children through divorce. Following introductory remarks discussing the importance of relationships to children, the booklet suggests ways to prepare children of various ages for separation. The booklet further discusses concerns related to parenting at home while the other parent is away such as social support and security. Suggestions for parenting from a distance relate to ways of keeping involved and tips regarding phone calls. The importance of informing the school or child care provider of parents' travel is emphasized. Suggestions for coming home relate to helping children and parents get to know each other again. The special needs of military families are also described. The booklet then discusses the potential impact of temporary parental absence on children and the ways children show stress. The booklet concludes by discussing ways to help children cope and describing possible problems, including regression, aggression, temper tantrums, fears, and sleep problems. (Contains a 15-item bibliography and 3 additional resources for parents.) (KB)

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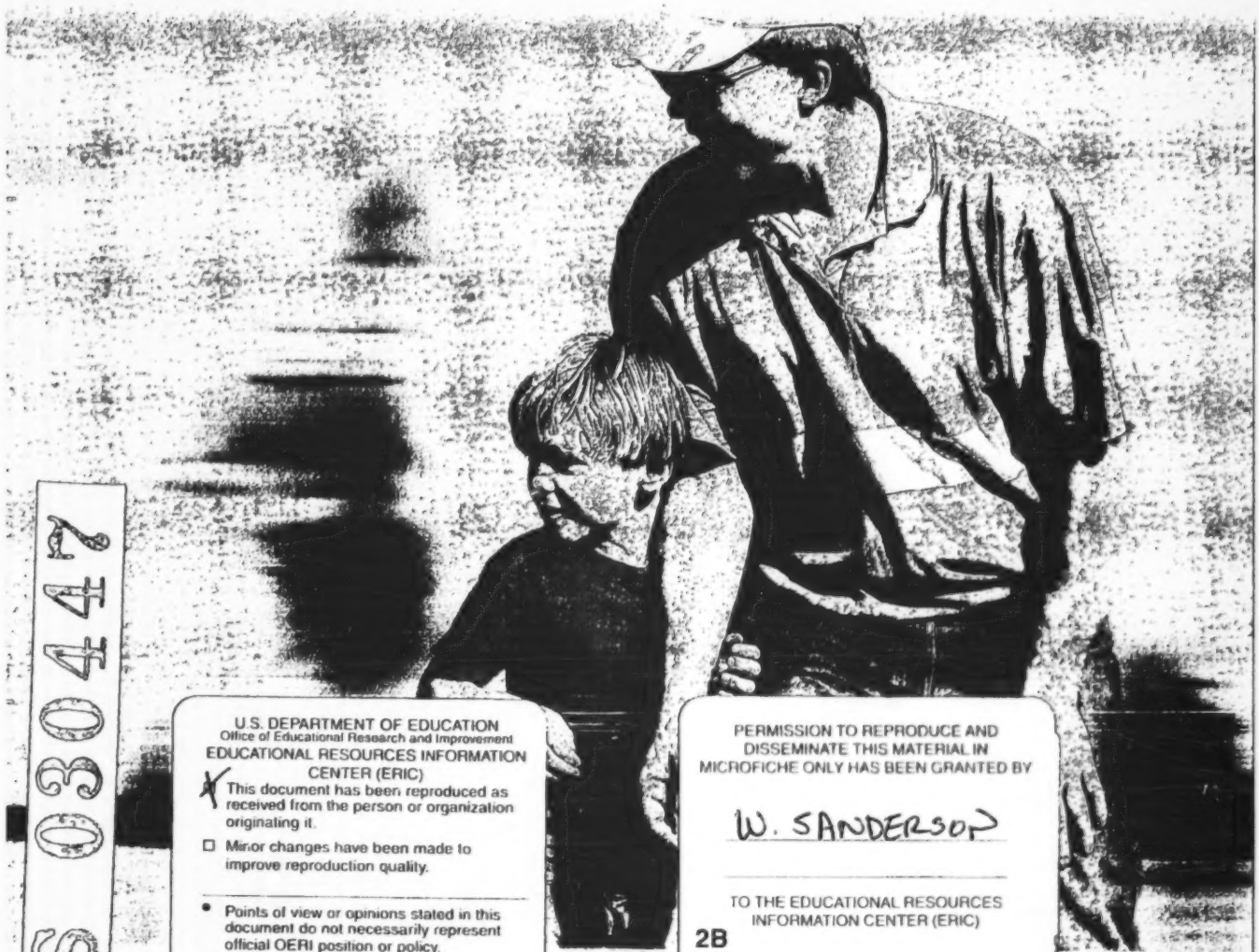

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DEFENCE

AECA ... *voice for young children*

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Australian Early Childhood Association Inc.

Parenting at Home and Away

PAM LINKE

CHILD & YOUTH HEALTH

About the author

Child and Youth Health, South Australia, works in partnership with individuals, families, and communities to enhance the health status of children and young people, focusing on the promotion of health, and the prevention of ill-health and supporting parents of children and young people. Pam Linke is currently developing an information plan for Child and Youth Health state-wide parenting services which range from a home visiting program to parenting groups and counselling and the development of resources. Pam trained as a social worker and has done further studies in children's literature and early education. She is author of other books including Home is Where the Family Is: Moving House with Children, Pants Aren't Rude, and Let's Stop Bullying. She is involved at national and state levels with the National Investment for the Early Years, the National Association for Infant Mental Health, and the Australian Early Childhood Association Inc.

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About AECA

The Australian Early Childhood Association Inc. (AECA) actively promotes the provision of high quality services for all young children from birth to eight years and their families, and supports the important role of parents. AECA is also the national umbrella organisation for children's services.

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Introduction

In recent years it has become more and more common for one or other parent, more often the father, to have to spend time away from home in relation to their work. The days when families all lived and worked in a small area, and children shared in the working life of their parents, are long gone in Western society. Fast and easy travel means that new opportunities have opened up for people in the work force. This means there are also new challenges for parents to maintain their family and parenting relationships, as well as make the most of their jobs. There are also better opportunities than ever before to keep in touch with faster and cheaper travel, generally fast postal services and electronic communication like email and the internet.

This book is written primarily for parents who have to spend time away from home, their partners and their families. However, much will be relevant to parents who are separated from their children by family break-up and divorce. The aim of the book is to reinforce the importance of parents to their children and to offer some strategies for maintaining a strong parenting relationship from a distance. Because of the integral relationship of children's well-being with that of their parents, some parts of the book are addressed to parents' needs.

"For children, parents are important wherever they are"

Tips:

1) For convenience the terms 'he' and 'she' in referring to individual children are alternated between sections of the book. Where possible the plural 'they' is used.

2) This book is written for parents of young children, from birth until about eight years old, although much of the information can be adapted for older children.

3) Words for parents, such as 'Dad' and 'Mum' are used interchangeably as they vary between families.

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The importance of relationships to children

Children's understanding and perception of the world is based on their early relationships. These relationships form the foundations for their future development. Over the early weeks and months of life, babies begin to form relationships with a few people who do most of their care. Relationships are formed through the look, smell and feel of each other, and through the daily actions that take place in caring for a baby. In these close relationships babies learn to make sense of their new world, where even the smallest things or happenings are new and strange.

"For infants and very young children, continuation of care by the primary caregiver is of fundamental importance"

Babies are also learning about themselves. Their first understanding of themselves is through the eyes and actions of their carers.

- When the carers hear their cry and respond, they start to learn that the world is a safe place that can be trusted.
- When the carers smile back at them or copy their little sounds, they start to learn that they are real people who matter. These early responses are the beginnings of communication.

- When their special carers smile at them lovingly and hold them gently, they learn that they are loved and loveable.

By the time babies are about six months old or so, they will be developing special relationships with their closest people. This is often called attachment. A secure attachment and relationship of trust with at least one person is important to children's ongoing development. Even though they usually have a preference for the person who does the most caring for them, they can have an attachment relationship with more than one person. This special relationship with the important people in their lives is what young children need to feel safe and free to take the next steps: exploring and learning about their world and themselves. It is also what provides a safe base for them to deal with the changes and ups and downs that are part of everyone's life.

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By the second half of the first year, babies are also developing an understanding of the existence of things and people, even when they can't see them. It is a significant new step in their understanding about themselves and the world. They will start to look for their special people when they are not there, and may show distress when a special person leaves, even for a short time and at times like bedtime. This is because infants don't yet have the language or understanding to know that you will be coming back—even when you tell them you will. They just know that the person they depend on for safety is not there any more.

This kind of dependence on people they know well, and anxiety when they are separated, can last in varying degrees until children are about three years of age. By then they will usually have learned that their special people are still there for them even when they can't see them. During these early years children are practising independence by moving away from their special carers in short 'adventures', each time coming back to check that their safe person is still there. Gradually as they get more confidence they move away further and for longer, as they move onwards in their journey towards becoming independent persons.

Feeling secure about their special relationships is one of the most important steps towards resilience; developing the inner strengths to cope with the ups and downs that the world brings to everyone.

After children are about three or four, their special people are still very important to them, but they have more understanding of language and more ability to make relationships with other people as well. Children usually have strong attachments to both parents, and separation from either parent will affect them.

"The only way to develop relationships with children is to spend time with them—caring for them, talking to them, listening to them, and playing with them"

Although separations are still very significant to them, children are now more able to understand, and they have more ways to manage loss and change. They can talk about feelings and get support with words. They are likely to have other close people such as relatives, maybe carers or teachers who can help support them through changes. As they approach primary school age they also have friends to support them and be with them. Their understanding of their world and relationships grows daily.

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Preparing children for separation

"Relationships are important to children, and separation from a person they are attached to will be traumatic"

Very young children

Babies and very young children (under about three years) don't have the language and understanding to comprehend what is happening to them, so the loss of someone very close to them is likely to be more difficult for them. It is as if someone they depended on just disappears out of their lives, and there is no real knowledge that the person will return. Because they don't have the words to express their feelings, people may not realise they are upset. Adults may say things like 'He is too young to know' or 'She is too young for it to matter'. This is wrong. For the very young it matters a great deal.

Young children's need for and dependence on their special relationships have some important implications:

- that they will be able to use these relationships to help them deal with all the changes that happen in their lives;
- that it is important to keep special relationships going even when you are away from home, because these are the foundation stones for children's future development; and
- that if your child is very young (e.g. a baby) and you know that you are going to have to be away for some time, you need to help your baby to develop a special relationship with someone else as well, so the separation from you won't be too devastating. If the main carer is the parent who stays at home, the effect on the infant or toddler is likely to be much less. Families of infants where the care is equally shared will have helped their children prepare for separation from either parent, although there will still be an impact.

If children are very young (e.g. toddlers) it is not helpful to talk to them about a parent's going away too long in advance. Young children don't have a real sense of time, so the waiting can seem like a very long time indeed. A few months or weeks is not very long for an adult, but it can be a large part of a young child's lifetime. For toddlers, a day or two in advance is plenty of time to let them know a parent is going away.

The best ways to prepare very young children for a separation are to:

- make sure that the child has a secure and close person to be with before and during the separation;
- keep up their daily routines;
- keep on with their little rituals (the special ways they like to do things); and

- play lots of games with them (such as hide and seek) where Daddy goes and Daddy comes back.

Changes in a young child's life, for example, change from a cot to a bed, toilet training, or taking away a dummy or comforter, should not be introduced when a parent goes away. At these times children need the safety of what they know. In fact many children will go back to needing a dummy or comforter when they have given it up. If any of these developments (such as toilet training) happen naturally, and are the child's choice, it is okay to let them happen, but adding any unexpected changes to the separation is most likely to cause further stress to the child. If you let them have their dummy, or whatever they need for comfort, it helps them to learn to manage the separation. They will give it up when they feel confident again. (You never see 21-year-olds sucking dummies!)

If the other parent is away for a long period of time, some changes may need to happen, and can be managed by careful preparation, and being responsive to children's feelings in planning for the changes. If the parent at home needs to increase working hours, for example, it is best to do it very gradually if possible, so the children do not have too many changes at once.

Older children

Preschoolers and school age children can, and should be, included in discussion about family matters much earlier, as they will know from your conversation and preparation that

something is going on. It is always better to have to deal with the known than with what you imagine might be happening.

Talk about feelings as well as events

Take some time when you are not being pressured by other things, to tell your older children about what is happening. Even if it has happened before, it is worth taking time to tell them about it, and for them to be able to talk to you about what it means to them. Feelings are important as well as situations and actions, so tell your children how you *feel* about going, as well as *what* is going to happen: are

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you excited about a new situation or adventure, sad to be going away from them, etc. Then ask them to tell you how they are feeling about it.

"When children can talk about their feelings, feelings become more manageable"

Let your children know that they can always tell you how they are feeling, even if you cannot change things. Children will be helped when you take their feelings seriously, even if the issue does not seem important to you. Different things worry different people at different stages of their lives. It is unhelpful to brush off their feelings by saying something like 'Don't worry'. Let them tell you what is worrying them, then you will have a chance to look together for ways to help them. Remember that sometimes children (and adults) express feelings of fear or disappointment through anger. 'I hate you' really means 'I am angry ... (because I am scared/disappointed/ hurt etc.)'. Often children will talk about their anger or hurt to the person with whom they feel safe. Keeping this in mind will help you to keep it in context and respond appropriately: 'I can see that you feel upset—it's okay to tell me how you feel. Do you want to tell me about it?' If children don't want to talk, it is best not to try to make them, but to leave the way open for another time: 'I can see you don't want to talk about this now, but I will be here if you want to later on'.

Children who are able to and have the opportunity to talk about their feelings, usually do better in the long run.

Answering questions

It is usually best to answer questions simply and honestly, while keeping a focus as far as you can on the positive. Find out what the child is thinking before you answer: 'What do you think about it?'

Children may sometimes ask you questions you cannot answer. They need you to be honest rather than pretend that everything will be how they hope. This can happen, for example, if they ask when the other parent will be coming home. You may have to say that you don't know, but he or she will come back as soon as possible, rather than give them a time that can lead to disappointment.

Misunderstandings

Children sometimes think that something they have done has caused a parent to go away. Often talk in the home can lead to this misunderstanding, as parents sometimes talk about children's misdeeds in ways that they don't mean to be taken literally. 'I can't stand any more of this noise', 'I need a break', 'You make me tired/give me

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a headache', 'These kids will drive me mad' and so on. Making sure you listen to their feelings and fears will help you to know if there are any misunderstandings and to reassure them.

Tell them that your work is why you need to go and that it is important work. Let them know that you will miss them and wish you did not have to leave them, and talk about how you will be able to continue to help look after them 'long-distance' and how you are looking forward to coming home again.

Some things to do

"When a parent is away it brings opportunities to learn about new things and develop new skills"

If you know where you will be going, help your children to find out about the place in advance so they will have a picture in their heads of where you are. You may be able to get photographs of the place as well, to show what it looks like. You could make a 'plan' of the time away as far as you can—where mum or dad will be and when.

If the child is too young to understand dates and distances you might make a picture plan with moons for sleeps, aeroplanes or ships for travelling, and pictures of the place you will be.

The child can then help the picture along the plan or chart to mark off the time until you return. Even though this can seem daunting if it is a long period, children who do this find it helpful to see the number of sleeps getting gradually shorter. If you are not sure of the actual date, children need to be aware that it is a bit of a guess and be prepared for possible changes.

Children who are old enough can follow the route on a map on the wall or a table and update it from phone calls, or stick postcards on it.

You could make up a story, even a simple story for children as young as two years old. Make the story about a trip away and a happy return. It could be a story about a real family with a child ('just like you'), or a story about a favourite toy or animal. The story could include something about the family, the major events of the trip, the child's feelings about it and then the return home. It will help if the child or pet in the story sometimes feels good about the change and sometimes feels sad or cross, just like real children. If you write it down and read it, often it will help your children to cope with the changes.

You could take a family photograph before you go, and another when you come back to look at and talk about family changes over the time.

Children can help you prepare or pack, help with tasks such as cleaning shoes and making plans for

how you will keep in touch while you are away. Being involved and helpful assists children to manage sad feelings and fears.

Children can also take on a special responsibility, according to their age, while you are away. This could be minding something important for dad or mum, e.g., car keys (children almost always think car keys are important to their parents), or doing a special job that you usually do.

Whether the absence is long or short, a long way away or not so far, you need to have a way to 'mark' comings and goings. Families do this in small ways in their everyday lives, with a kiss goodbye in the morning and again at home-coming, or a time for a drink together, or having an after school snack to talk about the day.

All these things are part of managing the daily and bigger changes that happen in everyone's life.

In one family where the father goes away each week, the family wave at the window when he leaves. On his return he phones his wife when he is about 20 minutes from home so she and the children can be waiting at the gate when he drives in. In another family where the father goes away each week, neither his leave taking, nor his return, are noticed by the family. In this case the father feels as if he doesn't matter and the children are learning this too, so they are at risk of missing out on one of the most important relationships they will ever have. Both parents need to take responsibility for planning for ongoing parenting—at home and away. Leaving and returning does not have to be a 'big' event, it depends on the family, but rituals, even small ones are helpful in managing change and helping families stay connected.

"When you are saying goodbye and in the lead up to going, help your children to focus on your coming back, not just going away"

Tip: If the parent who does most of the children's arrangements is going away, it helps to leave a note book with helpful information, e.g. times for immunisation, times and places for school pick up and drop off, times for after school classes, what to pack in school lunches, the doctor's number, dental appointments, phone numbers of friends' parents, etc.

Parents' feelings

If both parents have shared their feelings with each other and feel supported and understood, and the parent at home feels that she or he can cope with the separation, it will go a long way to assisting children to deal with it. If you are upset or anxious, your children will also be upset and anxious without really knowing why. Babies and very young

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children are extremely sensitive to parents' feelings.

There are likely to be different concerns and issues for each couple. Some of them are not ones that can be solved. However, trust is built on openness and sharing of worries, as well as sharing of pleasures and joys. Taking time to listen seriously to each other, even if the other's worries don't seem important to you, or it is about something you can't change, is a helpful way to build the kind of trust that will withstand separation and stress.

Some couples have said that they have needed to talk about:

- concern about how the parent at home will be able to manage everything;
- fears that something might happen to the person away or at home;
- managing finances so the person at home can cope if there is an unexpected financial crisis, e.g., the fridge, or the car (or the roof!) collapses;
- the fact that one parent is going off to an exciting new adventure while the other will have extra work and responsibilities; and
- worries about being alone, or what will happen if the children get sick.

Practical preparations

People who manage separations best are those who have thought about it in advance and prepared themselves as well as they can for the change. This means thinking about the things that your partner does, or that you do together, that will have to change and making sure you have the skills to cope with whatever new responsibility you will have. For example, in some families, one partner manages all the finances. Managing financial matters (such as the accounts, insurances and school costs etc.) together prior to separation will mean that both partners feel involved and neither will be hit by an unforeseen problem.

Parenting at home and away

There are two parts to this section—parenting at home while the other parent is away and parenting while you are away.

Parenting at home

> *"I can do it—I have learnt to survive ... the feeling of being able to be independent is great"*

For the parent at home there are many adjustments to make—different tasks, perhaps new things to learn, managing the time that used to be shared with your partner, managing children alone, managing your work and home responsibilities if you have both, and helping children to still see themselves as being parented by two parents. One mother said 'you grow a lot when your partner is away, learn to be a bit stronger, fix things, find inner strength ...'

Try to make the time when your partner is away a good time, not just a 'fill-in' time. You will, of course, be much busier parenting and fulfilling all the necessary household roles, so there will less time for the children unless you make a real effort to protect this, even if something else doesn't get done. If possible, try to reorganise your work so that you are part time or do fewer shifts. Trying to do everything perfectly on your own

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can mean that you end up being seen by your children as too busy or irritable for them. You need to prioritise what is most important to you. If you do find yourself becoming angry with children when the cause is elsewhere, it helps to apologise and explain to them why you are feeling stressed (without putting blame on the other parent). This is good teaching for them in being able to say sorry. Children can be surprisingly understanding in these situations. One young boy when this happened said: 'It's okay mum, I know Dad's away.' Children need to know that whatever your feelings are, you can cope and will be there and strong enough to look after them.

Usually children do best if the parent at home carries on with the same discipline, rules and routines that are used when both parents are there. This is not always easy to do, but it means that children will not have such a big adjustment to make when the other parent comes home. It is tempting to relax on discipline, as this can seem to make life easier. However, if it goes too far, it can be damaging to children's sense of safety and security which, in part, relies on knowing where the limits are and what the routines of their daily lives are.

Help your children to keep involved in their networks of friends and activities. There is less time to worry if you are busy and it also supports

the sense of continuity and stability at home.

Children may miss the 'dad' kind of play and a mother coping on her own may not have the energy for it. One mother said she enjoyed occasionally pretending to be dad and having some 'rough and tumble' play with her children.

Weekends can be the most difficult time, especially if your friends mostly spend time with their own families and you don't feel comfortable about being part of their weekend. It is easier if you have another friend in a similar situation to yours and can plan to do some things together. Getting out of the home at least once over the weekend often helps to relieve pressures, as well as provide a change. You could try making a list of the different things you could do in your area and plan to do them each in turn. Outings need not be complicated or expensive, especially if children are very young. One mother of a young family managed to make a list of weekly outings that lasted for almost a year! (This sounds very creative, but you also need to remember that children, especially young children, often like to go back to the same place rather than a new place each outing.) Visits to different parks and playgrounds are always welcome to children, as is a walk on the beach, a visit to a library to choose books for the week, and going on a picnic (even in the backyard).

Social support

One of the most important things for the parent alone is to have some social support, to share problems and joys and also to help fill the gap that is left from the time shared with your partner. Some parents think that if they take up new friendships and interests and have to drop them when their partner returns, it will cause misunderstandings. One way of managing this might be for each parent to develop some independent interests and friendships when both parents are at home that you can continue, or step up a bit when your partner is away, and then step down again when he or she comes home. Taking a course in something you would like to learn is a good way of meeting people with similar interests as well as developing your talents. Joining a babysitting club may help you get some time for yourself.

There will be times when you will really miss having your partner to talk to about issues with the children, or to give practical help. Times such as when your baby gets sick or cries in the night for no obvious reason, or your teenager comes home long after curfew, or the power goes off in the dead of night, or you can't stop the smoke detector from buzzing. This is when you need, if possible, a close friend who doesn't mind being rung at odd hours and who will understand. The upside of this is that afterwards you can get a real sense of achievement out of managing whatever family crisis arises.

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If you are comfortable with groups, this might be a time to join a group of people in a similar situation. If you are not comfortable in groups, then just inviting one person over for a coffee can be the start of a supportive friendship. Family and grandparents can be a very helpful support if they are available, or you can take advantage of cheap interstate phone calls at night, and email.

Some organisations, such as the Defence Community Organisation, have well organised ways of helping you to meet others and keep up with what is happening. If your partner works for a firm that does not do this, you might like to contact the Human Resources Section and ask them to organise ways of support for families at home.

Security

Some women feel very anxious if they are at home alone and there is no easy answer to this. If this is a problem for you and you know that your partner's employment may take him away, it can help to be aware of it when you choose what kind of house you have and where you will live. Other things that can help are a phone by your bed and a number to call if you are worried, security door locks that you feel safe with, a dog, or having a friend or family member to stay. Your husband can give the message on your answering machine and you can leave some of his things in obvious positions if this helps. It is important to do whatever makes you feel safe.

Keeping in touch

"The parent who remains need to be strong and support the departing parent in keeping in touch with the children—without their support 'you're gone'"

Some 'home' parents feel that they should not worry the parent who is away with all the little details and worries about the family and managing at home. Many 'away' parents like to know what is happening and to 'have a say' about the things that are important to them. This needs to be discussed so that you can reach an agreement together. Big decisions need to be shared. The more sharing you do, the more the 'away' parent will keep up with what is happening at home and the easier it will be to settle back in.

Another way that children can keep involved with the parent who is away, is to keep a diary with pictures of what is happening at home, to be shared when the other parent returns.

If the absent parent is to have a birthday, or Christmas, or another celebration comes while he or she is away, the children can have fun making up a special treat box with small presents, photographs, a tape of a favourite TV show, maybe some of the treats (biscuits or sweets) that you usually have at these times at your house and even a few bits of your

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usual decorations.

Children need to know that it is okay to miss the parent who is away, and to talk about it. Sometimes this is hard for the parent who is at home and doing his or her best, but it is a sign of trust that children feel they can share these feelings with you. Young children who don't have a real understanding of time sometimes repeat the same question every day: 'When's (Dad or Mum) coming come?' If it is to be a long time you may just have to say something like: 'A long time, but as soon as he/she can ... and then we will ...' Focusing on the return often helps.

Tip: Some male companionship seems to be helpful to boys when their dad is away if this can be arranged with a friend or relative.

Some things to watch out for:

- *Letting children fill the other parent's place.* Try not to put older children under pressure to 'be the man of the house'. It is easy when you are alone to look to children to take the place of your partner in some ways, especially the oldest child or older children. This may mean that your child becomes more like a friend than a child, by taking on some of your partner's responsibilities. While you will want

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to share your feelings with your children, and it is also helpful and good for them to feel more responsible, 'grown-up' responsibility is too much of a burden for young children. It also makes it harder for them to adjust to going back into the child role when your partner comes home.

- *Expecting too much of children.* If you have an 'easy' child he may take on too many tasks and responsibilities in order to help you. Some extra tasks build confidence, skills and a sense of responsibility. However, too many can place too big a burden on a child. It is up to parents to keep an eye on this and make sure children still have time to play and be with their friends and enjoy being children.
- *Sharing your bed with a child.* It is comforting to have a child come into your bed when your partner is away. However, it can become something the child comes to expect and enjoy, so when your partner comes home it can cause resentment and distress. If both parents are happy about sharing, it can be managed by having a large bed or bedroom with room for a child's bed so everyone

can share, but it needs to be a comfortable decision for both parents. If it is not, it may be better to go to a child who wakes at night in their own room, and maybe put up a 'day bed' so you can rest at the same time.

- *Children playing one parent against the other.* It is easy to get caught up in this even if both parents are together. Children might say (and believe) that it would be different if Dad or Mum were here. Children learn to adjust to different situations, e.g. the difference between home and school, or home and Grandma's and in the same way to adjust to home when both parents are there and home when one parent is away. You can just say to the child, 'yes, it would be different, but this is how we are managing now.' Listen to what they are feeling in case there are some positive changes you can make. If a child complains on the phone to the parent who is away about the discipline at home, it is important that the parents support each other.
- *Children fearing that the 'at-home' parent may leave too,* especially if he or she goes to work. You can talk about work in different ways, e.g., 'day' work and 'away' work, so they are not afraid when they see you going out.

Some learning opportunities

When a parent is away, it provides special opportunities for children:

- to learn about managing change;
- to give extra help at home (being needed helps to build self-esteem); and
- to be proud of the parent who is away, and of what they do.

Remember: perhaps the most important thing you can do for your children is to nurture your relationship with their other parent. Think about how to do this long distance. One at-home wife was very touched when her husband made an eight-hour journey just to ring her on her birthday! This said to her that she was very important to him.

Parenting away

Children, even young children, can be as attached to fathers as to mothers and even when you are not there, parenting from both parents is important. What your children need to know in as many ways as possible, is that no matter where you are, you love them. You are still their parent and parenting goes on. You can continue to be involved in parenting by taking an interest in school work, for example, and supporting the parent at home in parenting decisions.

Keeping involved

There are lots of ways to keep yourself in their lives. Here are some suggestions:

- If you take a calendar or diary with you with special family occasions marked a couple of weeks in advance, it will help to plan sending parcels home, or making contact on the day.
- Make a video of you reading stories to be used at a special time each day. You don't have to have a big list of stories, because young children like repetition. For babies, you might choose simple rhymes or songs instead. You might be able to include some of the little things you do on the video, e.g. the way you blow a kiss goodbye and the special names you have for each child. This allows children to keep in touch with your voice and your image (how you look). Remember to try to look the same when you come home and not to arrive looking very different with a beard, or 'number one' haircut! (Sometimes submarine crews can come back looking very pale.)
- Make an audio-tape of your voice for children to listen to as they go to sleep—singing lullabies, or telling a bedtime story. Again, you don't need a large number of stories, young children enjoy and get comfort from hearing the same ones.
- You can have photos of yourself put on almost anything nowadays—a pillowslip so you are 'there' at night, a t-shirt, a cup or mug that says 'Dad loves ...'
- Have the children blow a bedtime kiss to you out of their bedroom window and tell them that you will be blowing them one at the same time.
- Use letters, phone calls, emails, digital greeting cards, and if you are lucky enough to have it, even voice chat on the Internet, to keep in touch. Some families have their own websites. This is not expensive and you might want to explore possibilities before you go.
- Don't ignore 'snail mail'—there is still something exciting for children about getting a letter from the letter box. For fun you can write letters on interesting things such as hotel stationery, a table napkin, a photograph, a menu, or some stationery from your work. You can

also include small surprises in letters, such as a drawing of something you have seen, a foreign stamp, a postcard for the child to write on, a little parcel with a small hotel soap—depending on the age and interests of the child.

- Taking and scanning photographs for the emails is something older children will enjoy helping with (sometimes these can be both ways, by the parent who is away and the children at home). Remember to photograph the little day-to-day changes that are happening, not just big things like birthdays.
- Send postcards from interesting places you have been, with some information about the place for children to share at school.
- One father makes up a calendar for the time he is away with a sticker over each Friday. Each Friday the children can peel off the sticker and find a special little message from him. Some could be funny, some loving, or thinking of you messages and so on.
- Another idea is to get two small tape recorders and record a short message each day, for example, at bedtime and for both parents to use. These can then be posted home at the end of a week.
- Plan ahead for birthdays so that there can be a parcel from you on the day. One that arrives in the post can be even more thrilling if it can be arranged. These special occasions can be the most difficult to manage. You might be able to work our some special 'away' birthday celebrations. These could include, for example, making a happy birthday video in advance to be brought out and played on the day, lighting a special birthday candle for the parent who is away and, if possible, birthday phone calls.
- When you return, bring gifts for the children. Even small gifts from another place can be exciting. If you have been away a long time, or have been somewhere exotic, you might want to write or email your children about what you are bringing them to increase the pleasure of anticipation.

"Make sure that each child gets individual telephone time with you and contact from you. Their own letter in their own envelope will be much more special than a note put in a family envelope"

About phone calls

It can be hard to sustain a phone conversation with children, especially very young children, so giving some thought to what you will talk about can help. Keep a notebook near you to jot down points or information from each call, so you can follow through on the next one, e.g., if your child says he or she is going to a party or an outing, you can ask how it went. The 'home' parent can also help by giving reminders of current interests and happenings. You can also talk about the photographs and what you noticed about them. Telling a bit about your own situation is great and helps children to feel in touch with where you are. Children love to know little personal things about you, such as what you had for dinner, what games you have played, any stories about funny happenings.

Ringing every day is ideal if it is possible, especially if you can arrange it at a time when everyone is home and the younger children are awake, for example, dinner time. This is not always easy with international time differences and can be expensive. Using a phone card is nearly always cheaper than using hotel phones. This is probably one area where the cost could be considered an important part of family wellbeing.

Sometimes a child will say she doesn't want to talk on the phone. This is quite normal and it is usually best to just let it go and not make a fuss about it. The next time there is a phone call the 'home' parent might suggest something special to talk about, or ask about, to give the child a start, for example, 'Daddy would love to hear about when you...' If the child still does not want to talk, it is best to let it go in the short term and just say, 'Daddy sends his love'. If it continues for some time, you would need to check what the child is feeling and if there is any underlying cause.

Tip: One time that it is important to get in touch with your family, if you can, is when there has been public news of something going wrong in the place where you are. If your family hears about something like a train crash on the news, they won't know that you were nowhere near it until you ring them, even if it seems obvious to you that you were a long way away. Phone calls at these times can save a lot of worry.

School and child care

It seems from research, that having a parent away impacts very little, if at all, on children's academic progress. However, feeling stressed or unhappy can interfere with children's ability to concentrate at school and to enjoy what they are doing, and for some children this can mean ongoing emotional or behavioural difficulties. Parents and teachers need to keep in close communication, remembering that the children's behaviour is an expression of feelings, and work together to help the child to cope. If the child is anxious, one way to build the link between home and school is to offer to help with classroom reading programs, tuck shop etc. Remember that children who have added challenges such as a disability or health problems, might find it harder to settle into a new place and may need more help.

Children who have previously gone to school or childcare with ease, sometimes become 'clingy', as they fear that the other parent may go away as well. Ongoing reassurance and being very reliable at 'pick-up' times will help. Sometimes a young child will need their parent to stay with them for a while until they regain confidence. A little routine saying for every morning helps some children, e.g., 'Are you coming back to pick me up?' 'Yes, I always come back to pick you up'.

It is important to let the school or service or preschool know what is happening, so that staff can respond to any concerns, or behaviour changes that children may have. They will then also be aware when they are talking about parents, that some parents are away, and be aware, too, of the needs and feelings of the children who do not show that they are upset. Some young children are able to say to the early childhood educator 'I miss my Daddy,' and get a cuddle.

It often helps children if the parent who is going away goes to the school or service and talks about their job either before or after going away, or both. In some cases, the parent's destination can be marked on a map in the classroom or centre, and the parent's letters or postcards can be shared with other children if the child wishes. One parent sent an email to the school each week and the teacher read it out to his child's class, which was very special for the child. You need to take the children's wishes into account with this; it usually works well for very young children but may be embarrassing for older children.

Coming home

"Every day is a special occasion"

When someone in a family has been away, particularly if there has been some danger involved, it can help them, and those who are at home, to revise their values. The parent who gave the quote above was talking about enjoying her family for now—using the 'good' china and not waiting for a special occasion, because working away in a place where there was both hardship and danger, had taught her that 'now' is special.

When someone in a family has been away for some time there will be changes both at home and in the person who has been away. If children are very young, they are developing so quickly that you may leave behind a baby who smiles at everyone and come back to a crawler who eyes you with suspicion to say the least.

One way to keep the 'away' parent involved with changes that happen at home, is to keep a video record of things like children's milestones such as learning to walk, first words, first day at school, out of nappies, new outfit, new skills etc. You might be able to send a video from time to time or if not, use it as part of the catch-up-time when the family is together again.

There are also changes in memory. It is easy when someone is not there to only remember the good things about them and it is easy when you are away from home to only remember the good things about home. So when reunions happen families may need some time to get to know each other again.

Welcome home

When a parent has been away for a long time, you need to allow time for catching up. It could involve a family celebration party with everyone's favourite foods, a showing of the children's diaries and family video, hearing about what changes have happened for all the family both at home and away. One family has a picnic to celebrate their Dad coming home. It is important to be aware that the person coming home may be tired or stressed and to work out what and when will be the best way to mark the home-coming.

If parents have been in regular contact while they have been away, coming home can seem like an anti-climax. Often the partner who has been at home will go to a lot of trouble to make the house attractive and especially welcoming and can be disappointed if the partner who is coming home does not seem to notice this.

There is all the build-up, then a kind of let-down or flat feeling, with little to talk about. Each family needs to work out its own way to manage this. In some cases the 'away' parent may want to go to work for a while. After a few separations most families learn what will be the 'sticking points' for them, and knowing what to expect is one of the most useful things in dealing with these.

One really positive aspect can be the relief it is to the parent at home to have help with the children again, and to be able to share all the big and small worries and pleasures about the children, with someone who cares about them in the same way.

What all this means is that re-acquaintance can be awkward at first. It doesn't mean that the love is not there, it just means that changes take time to adjust to.

Getting to know each other again

"A time to re-kindle the spark" ... "a chance for a fresh start" ... ."to go courting again"

It can take a few weeks or even longer for the re-adjustment after a long separation to be complete. It helps if the first week or so can be a relatively quiet family time rather than have a lot of social engagements. On the other hand, some planned family activities can help to ease over any initial awkwardness.

Parents who have been away for long periods and have not been part of their young children's growing and learning successes and challenges, can sometimes forget that young children take a long time to learn important things, and they can be slower than you expect and make lots of mistakes in the process. Taking some time to get to know where your children are at now is a good way not to expect too much (or too little).

Parents' responses

"You don't really need me here."
"But I want you here!"

Parents may need some time with each other, as well as family time and individual children time. Sometimes it is easy to pick up where you left off, but often the subtle or bigger changes that have happened need talking through and new patterns of working together decided. Each parent will be looking for the other to help find their place in the family unit again and this can cause a bit of grumpiness at first. After a few times away you learn what to expect and the best ways that your family can adjust. Talking it through and listening to each other's point of view is the key to successful adjustment. It is easy to think that if you don't quickly reach agreement, the other partner has not heard your viewpoint. This can be true, but it can also be the case that they have heard but not agreed with it and therefore discounted it. Both viewpoints and the feelings associated need to be acknowledged as well as the areas where you agree. The areas where you disagree and on which you need to compromise can then be worked on.

One of the things to get used to again is thinking 'two' instead of 'one'—two cups of coffee or tea instead or one, consulting about what film to go and see, planning weekend activities together. One wife remembers a time when she temporarily forgot her husband was home, packed all the children in the car for Saturday morning sport and went off, leaving him behind.

For the partner who has been away, there can be a real sense of loss on returning home—a grief for the special job and exciting events of being away. It takes time to adjust to this.

Possible challenges

- The person at home will have developed ways to manage the home alone and a place will have to be made for the person coming home to fit in again. Sometimes the new independence of the parent at home may seem like a threat to the relationship. This needs to be talked about and negotiated.
- If the parent who has been away has had a lot of exciting leisure time experiences in exotic places, the one who is at home may feel jealous. Even if there is no jealousy, there will be experiences that have not been shared, so there can be a feeling of missing out or not connecting about some things. Listening and accepting feelings helps, so can shared family holidays at an interesting place when they can be arranged.
- When two partners are apart there can be issues of trust on either side. Usually these are not damaging unless there is already a lack of trust in the relationship, but they need to be talked through. Asking

children 'What's Mummy been doing?', or asking the husband's mates what he has been doing are signs that this needs attention.

"Think about the ways you have successfully dealt with changes or new adjustments in the past and what has worked for you. You learn to get to know and be prepared for your reaction and your partner's reaction and what works to deal with these. These are the strengths you have for new situations"

Defence families

For Defence families there is extra stress when a family member has been on active service. Being exposed to the realities of combat or deployment in very stressful situations can bring emotional responses that are not always easily or quickly overcome. Ongoing stress can lead to anxiety, depression, and flash-backs of stressful events, nightmares, panic attacks and irritability. Sometimes the person will want to talk about it and sometimes they will not. Sometimes the stress causes problems such as drinking too much, being angry and aggressive, or withdrawing and not being able to get on with life. If this happens, family support is very important but it may not be enough. If a family member is showing signs of post-traumatic stress and is not able to move forward, it is important to get help. A first step would be to contact your local Defence Community Organisation (DCO) for confidential advice and information, your local doctor or a community health centre.

Children's responses

"Are you here forever Daddy?"

Sometimes the parent who comes home seems like Father Christmas to the children, bringing gifts, and allowing more leeway in behaviour than usual. This can be distressing for the at-home parent who has done all the day-to-day caring during the away time, and things need to be talked through so you can find ways to make everyone feel good. Remind yourselves that your children know that the everyday 'being there' is the foundation of their security. They can easily seem to forget it in the happiness of reunion.

Children who have been very attached to the person who has been away, may show behaviour problems when that person comes home. It is almost like saying, 'I had to be good when you weren't here, but now you are

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back I can show you how upset I was that you went away and left me'. It is easy to think that this is because they have been 'spoilt' in your absence, rather than seeing it for what it really means. It will help if you stick to the usual routines, but make allowances for the fact that children may be unsettled for a while in various ways. One child who was very gifted at drawing, drew angry pictures and refused to talk about them with his dad. However, with patience on the father's part, this eventually became an opportunity for the boy to tell his father how he felt. Another boy took several weeks before he would talk closely with his father. He was afraid he would get upset and did not want his father to see him cry. Again this is an opportunity to help children talk about their feelings.

Other children may cling to the person who has come home until they feel safe again and this can be difficult for a person who has been away from family and forgotten how demanding young children can be. If you allow the clinging until the children feel comfortable, they will naturally move back to their usual activities. Try ringing from work to make contact during the day, or allowing the child to ring you at work occasionally if this is feasible.

Sometimes children will not want the parent who has been away to go out when he or she comes home. You can help with this by being very reliable about telling them how long you will be and coming home when you say you will; this also builds trust. Sneaking out may be more peaceful, but it destroys trust.

There may be competition for Dad or Mum's time that has to be managed so that everyone gets a turn.

Children may test out the discipline again, trying out 'Mum's rules', or 'Dad's rules'. Or they may try playing one parent off against the other—'Daddy said it was okay'. Good communication between parents is important. Different responses will happen sometimes and when this happens, children need to see that parents are supportive of each other, and can talk about areas of difference. Sometimes this difference may come from the away parent having expectations of being instantly obeyed and needing time to get used to the world of children again.

Very young children may be meeting a parent they have forgotten in the flesh. From about six months to two years or so, suspicion and fear of strangers is part of normal development. So a father who has been away, say from when his baby was about four-months- to nine-months-old, might be greeted by a child who hides behind her mother and looks askance at him. Babies and toddlers take their cues about 'new' people from their closest carer, in this case usually their mother. When the child sees that this new stranger-father is not going to push himself upon her, she can relax. When she sees that her mother is relaxed and comfortable and enjoying this person, it will help to allay her fears. Then if her mother and father seem to be doing things that interest her, she will naturally move towards joining in.

Sometimes toddlers who are old enough to remember the parent who has been away, will reject, or not seem to know him or her on return, or a toddler will act as if the parent who returns is not special, in fact anyone will do for a mother. This is not forgetting, but a reaction to the feelings of loss that they have had. It is a way of showing that they are not yet sure of you and ready to trust you again. This reaction will pass with time.

Tip: it can undermine the parent who has been away if the one at home gives too much advice about how to manage the children or care for the baby. Some time alone with them will help the parent to gain confidence again.

What does it mean for children

There is not a lot of research about the effects on children of parents working away from home. What there is seems to indicate that this does not, in itself, cause long-term problems for the children. However, *every change, good changes included, means a need to do some things differently and cope with new feelings*, and when a parent has to be away from children for a time, there is always an impact on the children. How that will be shown and whether it will cause difficulties for the child or the family depends on many different things, including the child's temperament, other things that are happening in the child's life, or any ongoing family problems or illness which may affect the child's ability to cope.

If there are problems, there are also ways to help children to manage their problems and learn to adapt. In many cases children find their own creative ways of managing their feelings. For example, one small boy, about three years old, 'took on' being his father at his child care centre while his father was away. He insisted on being called by his father's name. In this way he was able to hold his father with him and to manage his feelings of loss.

Sometimes children will hide how they are feeling because they want to support their parents and not worry them. Make times to talk to children about how they are feeling and let them know it is normal to feel sad or upset sometimes. Bedtime is often a good time to talk. You can say something like, 'Lots of kids feel sad when their dad goes away, I am wondering how it is for you?' If they don't want to say anything, you can just leave some quiet space for them to talk when they are ready.

Other things that affect the impact on children

- *The kind of relationship the child has with the person who is leaving.* If the person who has done the main caring for a baby or very young child is leaving, it is likely to have an overwhelming impact on the child. These children need to feel safety and stability in their main care-giving person. For example, if an infant or young child's mother is likely to be working away, the daily care-giving tasks need to be shared a long time before the separation happens, so the child has another person to feel safe with. It is the daily care-giving that builds up the sense of security and predictability in early relationships. If the children are older, think about the kind of relationship they have with the person who is leaving and try to work out ways that this can be continued in some way over the absence. For example if a father plays lots of games with his young son, this could be a focus of emails, letters and photographs while he is away.

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- *The kind of relationship that is available to support the child during the absence.* If children still have their main carer, this will be a very supportive environment to deal with feelings of loss and readjustment. If children feel safe and secure in their living environment, it is much easier for them to cope with changes of any kind. Sometimes another relative or friend can step in and also help to befriend the child and do some of the activities that the parent who is away would have done.
- *Previous separations that the child has had.* Rather than make a child stronger, previous separations, particularly if they have been stressful, may make a child more vulnerable to another similar experience. Over time, and with help, children develop strengths in coping with separations, which will always stand them in good stead. However these can take a long time to learn, so a child who has previously been separated, may sometimes show more distress than one who has not.
- *How the child understands the separation and why it is happening.* One reason why it is easier for older children to learn to cope, is that they can talk about their feelings and understandings and any misunderstandings—such as a belief that the parent is leaving them personally—can be put right.
- *How the separation is managed.* The preparation for the separation, how it is managed and how children's responses are dealt with, is the way that children learn to cope with all the separations they will meet during their lives.

How children show stress

Even though children's responses to the separation from a parent are not necessarily serious, there can still be a variety of expressions of sadness or anger. Children generally do best if the parent who is caring for them is mostly positive, feels good about her/his relationship with the partner and has good personal coping skills—this stresses the importance of parents taking care of themselves.

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(Irritability can be a sign of depression and a signal that you need to do some caring for yourself).

Some of the things about the separation that can distress children include:

- loss of contact with a loving parent;
- guilt that they may have done something to cause the separation, or that their wishes may have caused it. Young children cannot sort out reality from what they think or wish. If a child has thought (and what child hasn't?), 'I wish Daddy would go away', and then it happens, it can be very scary;
- fear that something will go wrong and their parent may not come back (especially if there have been a lot of scary stories in the media);
- anger with the parent who has left for leaving them. Children often think parents are all powerful and could stay if they really wanted to;
- anger with the parent who remains because he or she is there and is safe to express feelings to; and
- fear that if one parent has gone, they might lose the other one as well.

Children do not necessarily progress through feelings in an orderly way, gradually getting better. Instead, one day they may be playing happily and the next day something will remind them of their problem and they will show distress or difficulty. Their feelings may be shown with words or with actions for example:

- depression and loss may be shown by becoming withdrawn or irritable and hard to get on with, or by crying, or going backwards in developmental skills, such as speech or toilet training;
- guilt may be shown by being sad and easily upset or by aggression or behaviour problems;
- fear may be shown by clinging and not wanting to be separated from the parent who is at home, for example not wanting to go to school. When children are afraid, whatever the reason, they are likely to cling closer to the person whom they know as a 'safe haven'. Trying to push them to 'be brave' and move away before they are ready, can make them more afraid. 'Giving encouragement for their achievements as they make small steps will help them;
- fear may also be shown through fear of such things as monsters, or the dark, or burglars, or by having nightmares; and
- anger may be shown by 'naughty' behaviour, disobedience or aggression towards parents, brothers and sisters or pets.

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Helping children to cope

All of the following behaviours happen to all children from time to time as they cope with their changing world and the pressures of growing and learning. The suggestions that follow are not just for children who have a parent away, but also for any child who is stressed for big or small reasons.

The most important thing about helping children to cope is to try and find out what is causing the behaviour and then try to deal with the cause. To do this you need to think about when it happens, what is happening in the child's day at that time—who is there, what happened before and what happens after. For example, a child who feels guilty that he might be responsible for what has happened, may misbehave in order to get the punishment he thinks he deserves. Or a child who doesn't believe it is okay to cry because he is missing his Dad, might do something that gets him into trouble and gives him an excuse to cry. Again, a child might misbehave at bedtime to keep the parent involved, because he is afraid of going to bed or bad dreams. In these cases, thinking about what happens after the misbehaviour helps to understand the cause.

"If the behaviour continues and the suggestions below don't help, it is a good idea to talk it over with a professional who can help you look at it from an outside point of view."

Regression

Children who regress or go backwards in their behaviour for a time, are really showing that they are not ready to cope with whatever pressures they are facing. Everyone needs a bit more nurturing now and then when we are under stress or unwell. It helps to allow them to act the age they are acting. For example, give the toddler a bottle again if she wants it. At the same time, give praise and approval for the times when they are really coping well.

Aggression

If children act aggressively towards a parent or anyone else, they need to know that their feelings can be managed and that you will not leave nor retaliate. They also need the safety of knowing that you are in control for them and that you will not let their feelings get out of hand and hurt either themselves or anyone else. You may need to firmly but gently hold younger children, or distract them, and to speak firmly, or

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sometimes even hold older children. You can say something like 'I know you are feeling very angry ... but I will not let you hurt yourself or anyone else'. If the child will accept it, offer to give her a cuddle to help her feel better.

Temper tantrums

Temper tantrums are common in toddlers and young children, as their feelings get the better of them and 'boil over' into a tantrum. Tantrums often happen when the children really want something and don't know how to get it or do it, and they also don't know how to express their feelings appropriately. The feelings eventually 'get the better of them'. If children are already a bit tense, or under pressure, the boil-overs may happen more quickly and more often. As with aggression, the loss of control of their own feelings can be very frightening for children and they need to know that their parents or carers are in control. When children are in the middle of a tantrum, they are not usually open to reason and often the best you can do is to stay near and wait for the storm to blow over. Afterwards is usually a good time to re-build relationships, hold the child and let him know that you love him and will keep him safe and that you are not angry with him for his loss of control. This is not the same as

'giving in' to children; this is about building relationships that can weather the bad times, as well as the good. Think about when the tantrums are most likely to occur and whether there are any changes you can make to your child's life that will take off a bit of pressure. As children get older you can talk to them about other ways to express frustration before it gets to this stage, such as talking about it and thinking about how to do things differently.

Fears

Fears of very young children are unspoken and often of very fundamental things such as loss or abandonment.

Two-year-olds feel safe because of the things they know and the routines in their world that give them a safe base to venture forth into the big outside world.

Many young children are afraid of separation or loss of a parent, and this fear can be heightened if a parent is away. Children may know other children who have one parent who does not live with them and this reality can bring a fear that it can happen to them.

Parents can help most by listening to and accepting children's fears, and at the same time letting the child know that they are not afraid of the same thing. So a parent might accept that the child is afraid of monsters under the bed, but not go looking for monsters as if the parent also believed there might be some there to find.

Because of the fear of separation, it is not a good time to use separation as a method of discipline when one parent is away. For example sending young children to their room for 'time out', or threatening to leave them behind if they won't come, are likely to add to their fears.

Other children may be afraid that you will not be there when they come home. For these children, it is important to be very reliable about where you will be to pick them up and to be on time. Some schools, and especially preschools and child care, will allow parents to stay until the child feels comfortable for them to leave. It may be possible to help around the school so the child knows you are nearby. Let your children know that while you understand their fears, you are not worried and you know that school is a good place for children.

It often helps children to give them some control of the situation and to ask them what you can do to help them cope. Some may be helped by keeping something of yours, or the other parent's, with them during the day, others by having someone else take them to school so they leave you at home, rather than you leaving them at school. Give lots of encouragement for defeating fears. For example, you might help your child keep a diary of

the times they are afraid and the times they are not, that shows how they are overcoming their fears.

It helps to remember that most children who have fears of going to school learn to cope and do very well at school when they settle in.

Sleep

Separation fears, and other fears, loom larger at bedtime and in the dark. This is when children may need extra comfort and support. This may include:

- leaving a light on for them;
- spending extra time on the bedtime routines which help children to wind down for the night; and
- sometimes comforting them in the night.

One way of doing this is to put a day bed in the child's room, so if you need to go to them in the night you can still get some sleep. Or you can put a rubber mattress on the floor near the your bed, with a sleeping bag. A child who wakes at night can come and crawl into the sleeping bag to be close to comfort.

Play and feelings

One of the best ways that children have to learn to manage their feelings is through play. In many cases they will manage this for themselves and adults only have to make play opportunities available. Play can give children who feel out of control, or afraid, a sense of power and control and an opportunity to express their fears. Thus a child who is feeling that life has got out of control may play games where they are very bossy with their family of dolls or toys, or where they do an activity that they can control.

Children who are afraid can play this out through their toys as well, and may have a toy which is fearful and which needs comforting. Older children can write stories where problems that they cannot manage in real life come right in fantasy.

Play usually works best if parents don't try to guide or direct it, as long as no-one is getting hurt. Make sure there are plenty of opportunities for children to play. Good play materials include families of dolls, puppets, paper and paint or coloured pencils, mud and water.

Parents can help very young children to learn to manage separations by playing come and go games such as Peek-a-Boo and Hide and Seek, or any games that involve coming and going, or being lost and found. In these games children are learning that people who go away come back. Dolls' houses and doll families for both boys and girls allow them to play out their feelings. Having two houses (even cardboard boxes) so there can be one for where each parent is, allows children to experience the coming and going and being away through play.

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Taking care of yourself

It is normal for the parent at home to have some difficulties in coping as well as some joys, like building personal confidence and competence. For your own sake as well as for your children, you need to care for yourself.

It can help if you don't expect too much of yourself, such as expecting one person to be able to do everything as well as two people. Your relationships are the most important part of your life, so take other pressures off when you can. Some at-home parents who get an extra allowance when their partner is away, use some of it to take the children out for a meal once a week when they don't feel like cooking.
If you don't have this, think of other short-cuts, or ways you can make life easier for yourself.

Most of all, you need your own support people whom you feel free to turn to, to talk things through or get a helping hand.

Getting help

Usually patience, respect, listening and consideration will mean that your family will come through the experience of separation with new strengths, new skills and new confidence. However, occasionally either the separation, or perhaps some of the experiences that have occurred during that time, will leave stress that don't go away. If one partner or a child continues to show signs of distress—such as withdrawal, sleeplessness, loss of interest, or continued irritability, you may need to get help from a health professional. It is better to get help to work through things than to try to pick up the pieces when someone has become very distressed (see resources over for suggestions).

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Resources

Child and Youth Health Website <www.cyh.com> has a large number of topics about parenting, including coping with difficult times, information about childhood illnesses, and parenting teenagers.

Check whether the state you are in has a parent help line.

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